

## let me tell you 'bout the sad man

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/37329538) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/37329538>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">Dream SMP</a> , <a href="#">Video Blogging RPF</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Ranboo &amp; Michael the Baby Piglin</a> , <a href="#">Clay_  Dream &amp; Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">michael the baby piglin - Character</a> , <a href="#">hes not a baby piglin in this tho</a> , <a href="#">Clay_  Dream (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - Zombie Apocalypse</a> , <a href="#">Ranboo-centric (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Zombie Apocalypse</a> , <a href="#">Blood</a> , <a href="#">Blood and Injury</a> , <a href="#">Minor Violence</a> , <a href="#">Burns</a> , <a href="#">Child Death</a> , <a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">Graphic Description of Corpses</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of <a href="#">battery city</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">MCYT</a> , <a href="#">happy chemicals (no matter how sad the fic may be)</a> , <a href="#">*consumes the angst*</a>
Stats:	Published: 2022-02-23 Words: 12,773 Chapters: 1/1

# let me tell you 'bout the sad man

by [thanotaphobia \(blue000jay\)](#)

## Summary

Ranboo holds up his water bottle and eyes it mournfully. It's half full.

“God,” he says to no one in particular. “I have– what am I doing? Why am I out here?”

(or, Ranboo makes his way across a desolate landscape with no one to help. Until that changes.)

## Notes

THIS SERIES BABEY ITS NEVER ENDING ITS ON MY MIND ALL THE TIME I HAVE HAD THIS WIP FOR A YEAR AND A HALF NOW!!!

if you haven't read the first fic in this series, it's not mandatory but it does help explain some things!!!! so please go check it out!!!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The ground is hard and rocky beneath his back. His skull presses into what's probably a stone, jagged edges pushing against the thin skin of his scalp. Above him, vision swimming, the sky heaves and turns over and over, a mishmash of blue and white and purple evening sky.

*I'm going to die*, he thinks to himself, staring up into those endless colorful clouds.

His back aches. His left arm hurts more than his right arm, but they both hurt so that's really not saying much. His ankle is screaming in pain, and his head is pounding like someone's picked up the entire bassline from a screamo band and plonked it right down in his skull. His eyes are still sparking starlight, white bursts of energy flitting across his gaze and mixing with the sky above him, trees and green leaves framing what he can see and reminding him of his position.

His bag lies uncomfortably against his front. But honestly, Ranboo can't force himself up to push it off and take more stock of himself. Everything hurts, and so for a little while at least, he lets himself drift with that one thought in his mind: he is going to die.

It's a long time coming, to be honest. He'd thought his luck had been bad when the apocalypse had started and he'd been on a school trip to England— no parents, just teachers and classmates hunkering down in their hotel when the lockdowns were called. And after that, the chaos.

Ranboo can't remember most of the early days. It's probably for the best.

He'd somehow come out of it alive, with only scars echoing up and down his left arm to serve as a grisly reminder that *something* had happened to him. They ache sometimes, especially before a big thunderstorm, and Ranboo's not the most superstitious of people but hey, if they hurt when the sky was clear he usually got out of dodge— something bad was on the horizon.

His arm aches again now, but for a much less sinister reason.

Breathe in, breathe out, tip his head to the left.

His vision blurs and his head swims, but at least he knows his neck isn't broken. He'd fallen down before— he'd always been such a clumsy kid, and stumbling his way through the apocalypse was really the only option, wasn't it? Pain was the new normal, as shitty as that was.

Beside him, grass tickles his cheek and a stone presses into his temple. He's careful, gentle, and lets his eyes clear before glancing around. He's alone still, which is good— he'd made his way out of the compound and been running nearly all day, he's got to be miles away—

No shouting, no people, except in his own head, which *hurts*—

He takes a minute and breathes again. His ankle flares with pain.

Look. He'd been running all day, and he was exhausted. Sue him for not seeing the hillside, or the log he'd twisted his ankle on, or the rocky creek bed at the bottom of the clifflike hill. He's not the most observant on a good day, and today had been panic-fueled, and so when he'd stumbled over the edge and seen a fall in his future, he'd brought both hands up to his head and just gone boneless. A faint memory of a class long ago— drunk people survive car wrecks more than sober people, because they go limper than sober people do and it helps them not resist the flow of energy in a crash— and he'd just tried not to resist the tumbling fall as he went.

His head hurts. The grass is very green, so green in fact, that he has to shut his eyes to keep out the brightness.

*A concussion*, he thinks to himself. *Probably a concussion, sprained ankle, bruised arms and ribs.*

He takes stock of the rest of his body. It hurts, yes, but none of his limbs have that distinctly “I-am-broken-and-need-to-be-splinted” feeling.

*You're fine*, he tells himself, and slowly, lifts his right hand up. His shoulder twinges, but the pain is minimal other than that. His fingers find the zipper of the bag over his chest and he fumbles with it for a second before just shoving it off of himself entirely, the muffled thump of canvas against dirt making his head pound again.

*Oh*, he thinks, and then roots his hand in the grass and forces himself up to a sitting position.

Pain clouds, but he's felt worse, so Ranboo just takes a moment to breathe. In and out, slowly, feeling the trickle of something warm and wet down the back of his skull. He must've hit his head on a rock, he figures, as he dips his hand back to check and they come back wet and a place on his scalp smarts. Yeah, definitely.

Other than the blinding headache he's got, the only other significant injury he's worried about is his ankle. Twisted around a log, a sharp flare of pain echoing up his entire leg just before his body fell, he reaches out blindly with both hands and prods.

It hurts, but not as bad as he was expecting. Definitely not broken, since he can move it still, but there's a muffled twinge of pain as he rotates it and when he forces open his eyes in the bright daylight, the skin is already bruising a little bit.

“Don't be a baby,” he chides himself, finding his bag from where he'd thrown it in the dirt. “You can do this.”

Fingers find the roll of ace bandages he'd snagged earlier this morning— so early it had been dark outside still— and he carefully unrolls them and slips his shoe off with his good foot. It's mechanical, he tells himself, the first aid knowledge imbued in him better than his knowledge of the times tables or ancient Greek literature. Considering the state of the world, he thinks wryly, that's honestly for the best.

It's more difficult doing it on himself, but sooner than later his ankle's wrapped up nice and tight and being shoved back into his sneaker despite a little bit of swelling.

He can't stay here on the ground. He's miles away, but his absence would've been noticed immediately, and—

And he picks up his bag, closing the zipper carefully, ignoring the pounding in his head. He needs to keep moving, needs to find somewhere safe and dark to spend the night and let himself rest. Logically, Ranboo knows this.

Emotionally, he kind of just wants to curl up in a ball and let the squirrels eat him.

Are squirrels carnivores? Omnivores?

The train of thought haunts him as he shifts to his feet, gingerly settling weight on his ankle before deeming it alright to walk on. His bag settles comfortably around his shoulders again and Ranboo inhales, then exhales, then shuffles forward.

Oh boy, does that make his head hurt. The movement sends waves of nausea down his throat, echoing in his already-cramping stomach, but he doesn't let it stop him. He needs to find a place more suitable than a dry creek bed to spend the night, preferably somewhere he can *hide*.

It takes a few minutes, but eventually the nausea settles, and Ranboo stubbornly shuffles forward. Step-by-step, he thinks to himself, heaving a huge breath as he pushes himself over a pretty large boulder. Keep moving forward, he insists, mantras that someone had told him, even if he can't remember their name now.

His ankle burns and his head throbs, but the sun is setting and Ranboo's heart rate is through the roof whenever he hears so much as a twig snaps in the woods beyond him. It's probably nothing more than those omnivorous squirrels he'd been pondering earlier, but it still sends him reeling and glancing around, squinting through the fuzz in order to make sure he's alone.

He has to be alone.

Eventually, dusk settles over the woods, trees thinning slightly as the sun goes down below the unseen horizon. Ranboo keeps trudging forward— he'd chosen east for a reason, and he's going to keep going until he can't anymore. The trees thin and thin until finally, they break, and he takes a moment to glance upward, eyes adjusting to the dark as he does. It makes his head ache less, neck sticky with dried blood that he's yet to attend to.

Across the field he's found himself in is a really old barn. But it's got four walls and part of a roof.

Ranboo trudges across the muddy field, and stubbornly finds his way inside. Grass peeks up through rusted metal bits, sharp edges that Ranboo does his best to get around and find the darkest, most well-hidden corner of the space. The grass is so high it reaches his waist, which is a real feat when you're six foot six, and it tickles his elbows as he pushes through it and to the back of the structure. There's a small area where he can pat it down and push his back up against the wood, feeling his ankle twinge as he settles down on the ground again, head spinning lightly as he does.

His backpack is really heavy as he slings it off, sighing to himself, letting his eyes half-close as he rummages to find the water bottle. It's cool, and still intact, and it feels exquisite when he presses the cold plastic to his forehead and lets his eyes shut all the way.

"Man," he says to no one in particular, listening to the shuffle of breeze on the other side of the barn wood, listening to the plastic crinkle under his fingertips, "this sucks."

No one answers. Of course not. He's alone. Ranboo thinks if he heard an answer he'd actually probably jump out of his skin and then die.

It's just him and the skittering field mice, hidden but for the rustle of long grass.

Ranboo lets his mind drift as the darkness settles.

---

He wakes up all at once.

His breath comes in a rush, fingers clutching the canvas fabric beneath them, eyes fluttering open. His neck's at an odd angle, head pounding still, a vein in his temple throbbing lightly as he blinks and tries to quell the rush of light and sensation that floods him as he wakes. There's a bending piece of grass, the rough tip tickling his nose, and carefully, he lifts a hand and pushes the piece of grass away, itches his nose.

He takes stock of his body, the ache in both shoulders, the pounding fucking headache he has. Ranboo's not one for swearing, but he can't help the emphatic *shit* that escapes him as he straightens his head and feels his body twinge with pain. His ankle is less sore than it was, stretched out in front of him, and he takes a moment to draw up his knees and breathe. The grass rustles as he does, and he takes a second to prod at his ankle again. It hurts, still, but the ace bandages have kept it in place long enough for some of the swelling to subside. He can't stop moving, he knows this, rationality coming before care for his own body, and that's why he pushes himself to his feet.

It's why he takes a piece of the barn with him, a studded piece of twisted metal with grass caught in the bent places and rusted bits. It's why he cautiously peers outside, eyeing the clearing and the treeline before slipping out of the barn and shuffling into the outside, tipping his head up towards the sky. The clouds are firmer than the day before, the sky gray instead of blue, and he doesn't hesitate to tip his head back and let the light wash over him. The world feels gray, doesn't just look it, and Ranboo's not sure if it's just his mind giving him a grim reminder of his lonely situation or just how the weather goes, now.

He takes a sip of water from his bottle and chooses a direction— the opposite of which he'd come— and starts limping onward.

For the first time in what feels like years— has it really been so long?— Ranboo is actually, utterly alone.

He drags a hand over the trees as he goes, fingers trailing the bark as his feet make their own paths through the underbrush. He's definitely concussed; the headache he's got is clear evidence of that, but he's thinking straight and walking straight so as long as he pushes through the pain and makes sure to drink enough water, he thinks maybe he'll be alright. And he's not far enough away from— from where he had been to excuse stopping for a long period of time. Besides, he needs to find a town, or a house, or something that he can loot for food, because the meager rations he stole won't last him too long out here. And he's not a hunter. The thought of killing an animal makes him wrinkle his nose and hiss at the jolt of pain that comes with the motion.

Ranboo's alone, and he's got to start learning how to survive like this. Birds chirp overhead in tempo with the beat of his footsteps, every step taking him farther and farther away. He's alone. He's so freaking alone, but it's the least lonely he's felt in forever. He can't help himself, practically skipping through the woods and staring up at the gray sky and smiling a little.

There's a house, looming over the trees in the distance. No smoke, so likely no people, unless they're already dead. He hoists the rusted piece of metal like a baseball bat and heads in that direction. He might be alone, but it's the best feeling.

The house looms, windows like sunken eyes in gray skin, the paint peeling and chipping away. That's not a surprise, nor is the cracked pavement Ranboo steps onto, the grass and vines and greenery infecting the surface like a wonderfully natural disease. He follows the overgrown brick pathway up to the front door of the house, which is sitting wide open, and pokes his head in. Keeping an ear out, always, tipping his head and listening carefully for any movement or sounds. Nothing catches his attention.

The kitchen's directly inside, and when he takes a few steps in, he can see the cupboards hanging open. The fridge is in a similar state, and Ranboo doesn't really feel disappointed. Maybe a little tired, but he just takes this as a sign to lean against the rotting counters and sip from his water bottle, glancing around the kitchen and then, after a second, the living room. The couch is disgusting, a mess of rotting fabric and mold, and he has to hold a hand up over his mouth and nose at the smell.

There's a body on the ground, leathery skin papery against the damp carpet. The roof is falling apart, plaster dripping down from whatever pipe had burst at some point. Everything's still mildly damp, so it must've been recent, but the body is old. Sick. Blackened fingers and bones peeking out from ripped fabric, and there's a completely separated foot across the room. Bite marks, animals.

Ranboo backs out of the living room. There's nothing for him there, nothing in the house that is of any use. He ignores the roiling sickness in his stomach in favor of ducking outside, breathing heavily, waiting for the stench of mold and death to cycle out of his nose.

Maybe leaving had been a bad idea, he thinks to himself as he continues down the road, choosing to follow the pavement, towards what he thinks is a significant break in the trees. Maybe he should've stayed in the fences, where everything was safe and regulated.

And watched. And everyone was terrified to step out of line or have fun or joke. Where Ranboo was—

Well. The body wasn't fun, but the world is relatively quiet and safe as far as he's figured. Even now, as he walks down the open center of the paved road, nothing attacks him. He knows the numbers of the dead have been falling recently, scouts telling of reduced populations as they die and rot away. But it's different, seeing it for himself. It's different, knowing it wasn't a lie, like almost everything else they'd told him.

The road splits into two, and Ranboo, addled in his own thoughts, chooses the more well-traveled path.

He's naive. He knows it. But that doesn't stop him from making stupid decisions. More and more roofs start to litter the sky, houses framing the street and sagging on either side of him. He takes it all in slowly, creeping around and peering through boarded-up windows, into cracked glass, ignoring the houses with terrible smells coming from them. He'd learned his lesson with the first. Gross, he thinks, picking through overgrown front gardens and pressing his hands up against the glass of abandoned cars, peering with wide eyes into the front seats and occasionally, taking things.

A magazine, staring at the glossy front cover from where it had sat in the sagging mailbox. A roadmap from one of the cars, a busted-up green boxcar with a smashed front window and mysterious reddish smudges on the hood. He folds open the crusted pages, laying it out on the pavement and staring at the criss-cross of lines indicating roads. London's a mess of them, and he skips over that easily. Smaller towns, suburbs, rural areas. He traces the paths, wondering where the hell he even is himself. How are you supposed to use a map if you're unaware of where on it you are yourself?

The lines swim in his vision and his head is getting heavy just looking at the lines and words, so he doesn't linger on the map. He can figure it out when he finds street signs and maybe a town name to deduce where he is, but not right now. Not in the middle of some dilapidated suburban street where it's just him and the faint cawing of birds in the distance. So he folds up the map and gingerly sets it away in his pack before moving on.

His ankle twinges as he walks, a faint reminder of the stumble he'd taken the day before, but he pays it no mind. He doesn't pay any mind to the thudding of his head, either, but he does remember the lessons on first aid and the training he'd gotten. Concussions require rest, and staying away from bright lights and noises, and staying hydrated.

Ranboo holds up his water bottle and eyes it mournfully. It's half full.

"God," he says to no one in particular. "I have— what am I doing? Why am I out here?"

*Good question*, says the inaudible voice inside his head.

"Shut up," he shoots back at it. "I— it's fine. I'll figure this out myself."

*Good luck*, the voice laughs, and Ranboo scowls to himself. The stupid pessimistic part of him is informing him that leaving Sanctuary was a bad idea, actually, and now he's going to



die because he can't take care of himself properly. He'd learned skills, sure, but he'd never had to actually apply them before.

"Think," he says to himself, grasping his water bottle and glancing around. "Water is downhill."

The landscape is for the most part, flat.

Well then.

Ranboo forges onwards despite himself, staring at the horizon line and putting one foot in front of the other. His plan had just been to get away, and nothing much beyond that. He needs people, he knows, but he's not sure if he has a choice right now. Alone and free, but alone. Ahead of him, there's a crack in the road, filled with greenery that he dodges around and ignores. The town is silent, even as he gets further in. Ranboo feels like maybe he should've run into one of the dead by now, shambling with their broken eyes and faces and green limbs. All he's seen was the unmoving corpse in the house he'd gone into, but that one had been unmoving and there is nothing around. It makes his paranoia fire into high gear, every crunch of his own footsteps ushering panic through his veins. And yet, as he gets deeper and deeper into the urban jungle, nothing appears. Ranboo clutches his makeshift weapon, a stick of wood with metal embedded, and eyes around him. Houses are overgrown, leaves shifting in the wind, a few scattered shops are here or there. Occasionally, a corpse, lying flat on the ground. Some of them are nothing but bleached bones in the sunlight, others are fresher than that, but still old based on the state of the decay. Ranboo turns his face away every time, the mask over his nose hardly keeping out any smells. Nausea rises more than once, but he keeps it down and forges onwards. A convenience store stops him in his tracks at one point, digging through the trash in the aisles and peering on dusty shelves to try and find things. Ranboo's tall—his height comes in handy at seeing the back of the top shelves, places other people would've missed. But here the place seems to have been scoured from top to bottom. Nothing remains except faded magazines scattered on the floor. He finds one, picking it up, checking the date and flipping through before shoving it in his bag.

The store has given him nothing other than that, though, so he forges onwards. His ankle clicks as he walks and his head is still pounding, but the pain is manageable. His shoulder doesn't ache anymore, but when he stops around midday to check again there's a fair-sized bruise purpling his skin. Ah well. The silence overwhelms, and he has to start walking again in order to dispel the frightened thoughts. The crunch of his own footsteps is really the only thing stopping him from losing it, right now

"It's fine," he tells himself out loud. He'd always mumbled to himself, before Sanctuary. "It's fine. I'm fine. We're fine—there's no we here, though, is it? Just me and the breeze." He tips his head back, smiling slightly. "That could be a song lyric, if I knew how to write. I guess I'm talking to the breeze, not myself. Hey breeze, how's it going?"

The wind ruffles his hair. He grins.

"Aw, thanks," he says, turning a bit in a circle. "That was— that was very nice of you. And you can even reach my head— most people can't. It's like having a tall friend of my own. Think you can reach the super-top shelves for me?" The wind doesn't respond to that

question, but Ranboo's not really expecting it to. It's the wind, after all. He's... talking to the wind.

Man, it's only been a day or three of being on his own and he's already going bonkers.

Welp.

Ranboo ignores his shaky hands and forges onwards as the houses get closer and closer, as cars become more frequent in the road. He tries to walk quietly, keep his steps evenly spaced and heel to toe, eyes up and scanning his surroundings. The headache has faded to mild, a pounding in the back of his head that's easy to ignore, and as the sun starts to set after hours of walking, Ranboo's starting to look for a spot to spend the night before it gets too dark. He doesn't want to be caught out in the night for any creature to get him, much less lose track of where he is. Funny enough, he hasn't actually seen any of the zombies that surely must be around— he's only seen corpses so far, and even that has been kind of rare. They're startling to a degree, but by now Ranboo's accepted the fact they're there and relaxes with them as background scenery to his life.

Morbid, but it's how he has to think so he doesn't absolutely lose his cool in the center of some random town.

He's caught up in his thoughts as he goes to swerve around a corner, eyes scanning, looking for anything that could be categorized as a threat. The street opens up just a bit ahead of him, the cobbled stones widening and making way for more cars, or people. If either of those things were still around anymore. There's no people, but a few abandoned hunks of metal that Ranboo doesn't hesitate to investigate and loot. Above him, a bird screams.

"Righto," he says at it, tilting his head up and shielding his eyes with one hand. The bird glides in a wide circle, wings outstretched, before pulling them in just slightly and diving behind one of the taller buildings. He watches it go, the sheen of iridescent black feathers on the wind as it disappears behind a boxy apartment building. Another screech catches his attention, and he looks back up.

....that's a lot of birds.

"Where did you all come from?" Ranboo asks the circling creatures. There must be at least six or seven now in the air, the occasional screeching cry making its way to his ears. He watches for a few seconds as they swirl high above in the sky, and then all of the sudden he recognizes the pattern of their wings and the way they glide on the thermals.

Vultures.

And then they dive down behind the buildings with caws and screeches that leave his ears ringing in the gentle quiet of the rest of the town. Nothing else has been summoned by their call— at least, Ranboo doesn't think so. He can't see anything shambling towards him when he looks around, so he thinks he's fine. But curiosity wells up in his chest. He knows what vultures mean. He's seen them before, over great piles of dead human bodies. He's seen them circling above Sanctuary, high in the wide blue sky. Ranboo knows what vultures mean, and what they do. Yet, here he is, following the widening streets around the abandoned apartment

building and eyeing the street signs, making sure his footsteps are silent against the pavement. He can't hear any typical groaning and shuffling that usually comes with the undead— no, the world is quiet except for his breathing and the rush of wind and blood in his ears.

So he peeks around the corner of the building, hands gripping the outer cement. Ready to run if he has to.

The first thing he thinks is, *well, at least they're not alive.*

In front of him stretches a part of what used to be the town green, he thinks. City center. He's not familiar with what English towns looked like back when everything was alive, but he knows well enough what they look like dead. And this great big space in the middle of town clearly used to be a park, based on the trees lining the edge of the green.

Or, what used to be trees. Used to be green.

Now they're just creaking hunks of charcoal. Great big pencils for the sky, he thinks to himself, staring at the darkened grass and burnt out hollowed trunks. They're whalebones against the beach sand, a stark contrast against the rest of the dilapidated town. Between the streaking silhouettes of husked out trees, Ranboo can see a mound. A pile, of sorts, vultures picking at the top of it and one or two on the side. He squints— it's too hard to tell from this distance, but it's definitely burnt. The whole green is. The whole center of the town seems to be a shell of whatever it was before. There's still no zombies in sight, so Ranboo doesn't hesitate to make his way across the street towards the mound.

The grass crinkles when he steps on it, brown and crunchy underfoot. He makes his way to one of the trees, reaching out; it leaves a black streak against his palm when he lightly touches it, the charcoal sticking to his fingers and jeans when he tries to rub it off. A grey stain, but one that will definitely wash out whenever he finds a stream next. He forges onwards, peering at the mound of burnt stuff in the center, tilting his head to get a better view and trying to avoid the birds. One of them picks at a—

An arm, raised from the debris, fingers curled and blackened. But achingly, achingly human.

Ranboo realizes with mounting horror that the burnt center of the green is a mound of human... bits.

Everywhere he looks now, he can see it. A skull there. Blackened bones there. Stripped and charred flesh hanging from the mouth of a vulture. It's something straight out of a horror movie. Ranboo gasps, stumbling backwards in terror for a brief moment as he tries to take in the sight before him. It's terrible. It's disgusting. It's...

It's better than a horde of zombies, he supposes. These dead people don't bite. They just lie there, faces pointed outward and bones cracked from the heat in a silent mass grave. Ranboo hardly makes it to the edge of the green before he's landing on his hands and knees and heaving what little water is in his stomach to the ground, wiping at his mouth with a grimace at the taste. His hand is still gray from the charcoaled tree— they must've caught fire when the

pile of bodies in the center had been lit, he thinks, tilting his head up and staring at the black-and-white contrast of trees to clouds. Horrible, he thinks. Terrible.

Something rattles across the way.

He's on his feet again in a moment, wiping at his mouth and pulling his mask back up to cover his face. He's left it down since the zombies hadn't been bothering him— although, looking back on it now, there hadn't been any zombies left to bother him, had there? They'd probably all ended up in the burning pile, left to shriek in terror as they'd died there. Sanctuary had protected him from many things— gruesome sights, starvation, zombie attacks. However, they'd relished in the kills they'd gotten on the other dead things. Ranboo's accustomed to the horrible sounds the twice-dead make.

And the once-dead, now returned. Case in point: the creature across the street from him.

It's shambling. It's tiny.

It's a kid.

The thing is moving so slowly that Ranboo doesn't hesitate to lean to the side and gag again. Nothing really comes up. He's grateful for that at least, staring hesitantly at the zombie child who is slowly making it's way across the paved stones.

"Hi," Ranboo croaks out. This is all a bit much. The kid doesn't stop it's valiant quest to try and reach him. One of its legs is very decayed, to the point of it practically being just hardened strips of flesh and bone. Half of its face is completely gone, while the other half is scrunched up in... determination? Or maybe it's just stuck like that. Ranboo has no idea. He also has no idea how this tiny creature survived whatever happened to it's brethren in the middle of town behind him. And yet, it's here.

It's all a bit much, Ranboo thinks. A bit much. He really wants to sit down and breathe. But there's a zombie kid stumbling towards him that still has a pair of chompers in it's mouth. The kid can't look to be more than three. Maybe four. It's just so small.

Ranboo shuffles to sit on the curb, feet pressed to the ground, knees to his chest as he breathes.

"Hi," he says again. The zombie does not stop it's shuffling. "You scared me, did'ya know?"

Nothing. Maybe it turns it's head a little bit when he speaks, but Ranboo could just as well be imagining things.

"I'm sorry about your family," he says to the little thing. "Wherever they are. And I'm sorry for you. You didn't deserve this."

The kid trips a little, stumbling along on it's tiny feet. There's the barest remnant of a sneaker on it's foot, bright blue. Ranboo wants to cry when he spots it.

"I'm really sorry," he says again, and his throat is choked up. "I'm so so sorry."

The kid is only a few feet away now. Ranboo thinks about rolling up his sleeves and holding his arm out. Letting the kid bite. Maybe they'd roam the streets together then, both beings of the undead. Maybe then it'd be easier to sink into the stupid way of the world as it is now. At least then he'd be brainless. Not-thinking sounds good right about now.

The kid has latched onto his arm. Ranboo isn't stupid. He was raised into this world, by the people at Sanctuary; they taught him better than to go outside unguarded. He's got layers of clothing on, and duct-taped arm guards even below that. He stole them from the armory. It's a memory he doesn't like to ruminate on, staring at the kid as it gnaws on his sleeve. It's very determined, Ranboo will give it that.

"Stop it," he finally mutters, tugging his arm away. The kid immediately loses balance; it tips over onto the pavement, letting out a shrieking cry when it cannot get up due to its leg being mostly bone.

Ranboo feels the slightest bit bad. But also his arm is all gucky now, and that's no good. He wipes the tears from his cheeks with his clean arm, sniffing slightly as the kid wails. No other zombies have made an appearance yet— if anything, the kid's wails would've drawn them in.

"You must be the only one left," Ranboo says quietly, watching the kid wiggle on the ground. It's kind of like watching a worm, or an infant in a toddler's body. He supposes zombies sort of are infants, in a way. "I'm sorry."

The kid wails. Ranboo grimaces. "I'm not picking you up. You'd just try to bite me again. Your teeth aren't very effective, you know." The wailing trails off, and the kid lies still. Ranboo waits for a second, for the wiggling to begin again, but it does not. The kid just... lies there.

He reaches out and pokes it with his foot. Immediately, like a shotgun had gone off, the kid starts to cry again. It's utterly inhuman, the way it shrieks and screams and grunts.

"Still not helping you," Ranboo says over the noise. Behind them, the vultures take off. Man, he wishes he had wings. "Stop throwing a temper tantrum."

He doesn't think he can bring himself to end this creature's miserable life. The kid is green in the places he isn't leathery, and bone in all the rest. There's some sort of plant life growing out of his eye socket. He's tiny, he's pitiful, and he's a kid.

Ranboo can't make himself kill a freaking *kid*.

He's not hardened like that, despite the state of the world. He's soft. So he sits there and watches as the little freak of nature wails and screams and shouts and wriggles until apparently, it's tired itself out. It lies on the pavement, head dropped against the stones, and Ranboo sighs gently.

"Tired?" He asks. The kid grunts, then screeches again. Then promptly shuts up. Ranboo snorts, resting his chin in his hand and his elbow on his knee. It's not too comfortable, but his heart has calmed down from the scare earlier, and the adrenaline from seeing the kid. Now

he's just... tired. His head still sort of hurts. Maybe he can blame this whole situation on that. "Me too. If you weren't liable to eat my brains out, I'd say we could take a nap together." Somewhere above them, a vulture cries. Ranboo glances up, squinting into the sky. "They're circling again. You know, when vultures circle, it's because they see food. I'm not sure how great charred zombie flesh tastes, but to each his own, you know? Uh huh." The kid is wiggling, and Ranboo nods, like the kid's talking to him. "That's right. Fresh zombie flesh is much better. Not that I would know. You might. They used to talk about zombies eating each other, sometimes. Back in— back home, I guess. Or. Not home? Second home?" He scratches his face absently with one hand, watching as the kid wiggles. It's staring at him now as he talks, one eye open wide and gaping, the other empty as sin. "Stop looking at me like that. I'm not from here. I'm a— I'm a tourist, yeah, that's it."

The kid snorts. Ranboo snorts back. "Don't make fun of me for my accent. That's dumb. I can't help it. Besides, there were a few other Americans back there too."

The kid stills. Ranboo watches as it tips its head upwards towards the sky. He would too, but he's not keen on letting it out of his sight at the moment. It had already bitten him— he doesn't want it truly trying to attack him right now, not when he's already feeling kind of gross and crappy. Behind them both, the pile of burnt bodies reaches towards the sky. Ranboo follows the kid's presumed gaze, finding it on one of the blackened trees.

"I think that was an accident," he tells the kid gently. "The trees. At least, I hope so."

The kid grunts. Ranboo grunts back, watching as it wiggles once more on the ground. This time, it gets a hand underneath itself, pushing upwards until it's balancing on its feet once more. Ranboo eyes it warily, ready to bolt— he doesn't want to die, all things considered. The human urge to survive is one hell of a drug. Adrenaline is also one hell of a drug, something he's come to find out in the past few days. Even now his hands are shaking as he comes off the high of this discovery, and sooner than later he finds himself antsy to be gone of it. The trees claw at the sky like fingers full of rot, and this whole town stinks of something terrible. Carefully, making sure not to turn his back on the kid, he gets up off the curb of the street and readjusts his backpack against his back.

"Bye," he says to the zombie kid. It looks at him. He looks back, and then raises a quiet hand to wave goodbye. It's dead— it doesn't mean anything to it anymore, he knows that. But it's something to soothe his own nerves. "Good luck out there, little guy."

Then he turns to go. He makes sure the kid isn't going to attack as he heads down the curb, towards the other end of the green, and then hurries off towards one of the convenience stores. He doesn't think there will be anything in there; not with how this town has clearly been looted, but it's worth a shot. And he needs to find something indicative of where he is, so he can find himself on the map and try to figure out a plan of attack. Plans push through his head like a train, smoke trailing and engines roaring as he balances on the curb. One foot in front of the other, arms held out for some modicum of balance, one hand clutching his makeshift weapon.

Behind him, the dry grass crunches. He pauses, then turns.

The kid stares at him, jaw hanging loosely open. It's moved since he last looked at it, standing in the grass with one rotted foot and other slightly more intact. Ranboo glances behind himself, then at the creature once more.

"Bye," he says again, insistent. He waves a hand. "Go away."

He starts walking again, only to hear more crunching. It stops when he stops. Starts when he moves.

The kid is following him, with it's pitiful blue backpack torn to shreds on it's back, the one sneaker on it's dead foot, it's rotted face and eye socket full of green. Ranboo tests it—walking forward, stopping. The kid takes about as many steps as he does, dried grass crunching under its feet as it shuffles along. It's slow, but Ranboo knows it can go faster if it needs to. It's following him purposefully.

"Go away," he insists again. He hefts the rod in his hand. "I'll hit you if you don't."

The kid just looks at him, almost pleadingly. Like he knows Ranboo is bluffing.

Ranboo sighs, and turns, continuing towards the convenience store. Fine. He'll let the kid follow him— not out of pity or anything, but because it's a kid, even if it's dead. He's not about to bash a kid over the skull— he'd feel horrible. He's not that kind of person, even now. Even in the middle of the apocalypse. So he lets the little zombie kid trail along behind him, watching out of the corner of his eyes as it shuffles around the front of the store he makes his way into. Maybe it's hunting, he theorizes as he runs a hand along dusty shelves, searching for any leftover supplies that could be remotely useful. Maybe the kid is following some weird instinct. Imprinting, or whatever. Or maybe it's just following him in order to find the right moment to strike and bite at his face or his unprotected neck, or something. Ranboo's tall— it's not like the kid could reach him while he's standing. Slowly, he peers over the tops of the shelves and spots the kid once more— it's by the registers, staring at the shiny blue counters as though fixed in place. Trance-like, the kid bumps it's head into the surface once. It thunks, hollow. Then twice.

Ranboo has to stifle laughter as it keeps hitting its head, over and over.

It's almost... cute.

*No, he thinks to himself, sinking back behind the shelving and staring at a label. Dried mango, two euro. The text is long faded and worn. You can't find a dead kid cute. That's weird. That's so weird. That's weirder than anything you've ever heard.*

He risks peeking his head out over the shelving once more. The kid is still slamming it's head into the counter, gently, but enough to make an audible thump every time it does so.

"Hey," Ranboo calls out. The kid does not stop. He clears his throat, then calls out louder. "Hey, bud."

The kid stops. Slowly, Ranboo ducks back down under the view of the shelves and snags the dried mango (it's probably too old and gross to eat, but his stomach is grumbling and Ranboo

knows he can't pass up any opportunities). He walks, heel to toe, silently making his way across the floor until he's at the end of the aisle and can see the kid again. The kid, who is looking right at him.

Milky eye, green fuzz in the other. Ranboo blinks behind his glasses.

"Hitting your head isn't good for you," he informs the kid. He resists the urge to list off the symptoms of concussions to this kid, especially since he's in denial that he's still healing from one himself. "C'mon, man. Let it go. I don't know what 'it' is exactly, but you gotta."

The kid tips its head to the side. It's kind of reminiscent of a dog, if not a bit more horrifying. Ranboo crosses his arms.

The kid goes for his knees.

And Ranboo's not dumb— he's anything but. He's been raised in this world in a place that was focused on survival, first and foremost. It's the reason he's not scared of much out here. He's heard the horror stories, lived a few first hand. He knows that there are bad, bad monsters wandering the wastes. Only a few of those monsters were the undead types. He's not worried about catching whatever disease is making them reanimate. Duct-tape armor lies underneath his outermost layer of clothing, followed by another two or three, depending on the weather. He's not gonna get bitten. He's not stupid. He wears his mask and keeps alert.

Despite all of that, Ranboo still jumps when the kid starts gnawing at his kneecaps.

"Dude!" He shouts, scrambling backwards and promptly falling on his butt. It stings like crazy (and he's still bruised from the fall the day before) and he's sure he'll regret it later tonight when he lies down to sleep. The kid continues gnawing on his right leg, arms trying to cage him in as it fights to keep him down despite its tiny size. The little guy is weak— Ranboo could kick him off easily. He's about to kick him off easily when something catches his eye.

The backpack. It's blue. It matches the kid's shoes. There's embroidery along the top of it, clearly home-made.

*Michael*, it says in faded black thread.

"Michael," Ranboo says, against his better judgment. " *Stop.* "

The kid stops.

And well, if that isn't interesting.

There isn't any pain from where Michael is gnawing on him, only a dull pressure. Most of the kid's teeth have long fallen out and now leave only two black teeth and green gums behind, but Ranboo isn't taking any chances. He's got body armor on, crafted with duct tape and padded up in every place that zombies like to bite. Michael in particular is an ankle-biter, quite literally. After Ranboo says his name he stops biting, though, and lifts his head. Blank eyes bore into Ranboo's, and he swallows.



“Get off,” he says. “Michael. That was your name, right?”

The zombie kid tilts its little head at him, and then goes right back to chewing on his pant leg. Not the best, but hey, it’s a start.

Ranboo decides to leave the convenience store and burnt out town square behind him. Something about it makes him shiver, makes him want to run and not look back. He wants to get Michael out of there too— Ranboo had already been traveling pretty slowly at this point, and it’s really not a big deal to keep the kid with him. It helps that Michael effectively chases after him; where Ranboo goes, the kid follows with its slow shuffle-step, leg dragging and tiny blue sneaker battered to hell and back. They walk and walk and walk, far out of the town and into some suburban countryside. Empty out here, with houses that have no zombies in them. Ranboo locks Michael in one of the rooms that night, and listens to him thump against the wall until he falls asleep.

With the rising sun comes his dilemma.

He can leave the kid now, abandon him in the locked bedroom of the house he’d commandeered for the night. Now that his head is feeling better and his ankle is sore but not screaming at him, Ranboo needs to go. He needs to get as far away from Sanctuary as possible and find some other people to help him, or maybe just vibe on his own for a while. He’s capable of that, he thinks. Miserably, he eats a stale granola bar and stares at the wall where he can still hear thumping. Dealing with the zombie kid will slow him down, and he knows it.

Despite that, he looks over. Stares at the door, and quietly, the thumping stops.

Ranboo gets up. Tosses his granola bar wrapper in the bin despite the fact littering really isn’t a problem anymore, and gently unlocks the door. He’d shoved a chair under it last night just to be sure, and the window had been too high for the little guy to get to. When he takes the chair away and hesitantly opens the door, he’s kind of expecting to be assaulted by the guy.

He’s not expecting... nothing. For a minute, panic surges through him and he throws himself through the door, Michael’s name half-shouted from between his lips before he spots him.

The zombie kid, the kid who is sick and dead and gone, is lying in bed.

With a blanket pulled over himself.

“What,” Ranboo murmurs as he takes it in. The kid is lying with his head tipped towards Ranboo, chest unmoving, eye open wide and the other a dark green. His little face is still, and his eyes land on Ranboo just as Ranboo looks at him. He’s pulled a dusty, ripped and bloody blanket over himself, half-over his legs and up his torso in a way that means it drapes off the rest of the bed and onto the ground. Clearly the kid struggled. He’s on his side, backpack still on, and Ranboo chokes on his own spit before he flees from the room, sinking to the ground in the hallway outside with his knees to his chest and his arms around those.

He can’t leave him here.

The thought doesn't disturb him. It doesn't surprise him, either, a miserable conclusion to this inevitable journey. Tears gather in his eyes and he snuffles, shoving his face into his arms and sniffing harder. There's a thump from the other room, and then shuffling footsteps, and then tiny rotting gums putting pressure on his arm.

"You can't eat me," Ranboo says miserably, snottily. The inside of his mask is going to be a mess. "I'm sorry."

Michael doesn't respond. He just keeps chewing. Eventually Ranboo moves, shifting to his feet and popping his head back into the bedroom. The blanket is on the floor now— he picks it up, folds it, and slings it over his arm. The bedroom had been a child's, and there are toys all over the floor. He scrounges until he finds something rubbery and soft, pliable and similar to the texture of the duct tape on his arm. Michael shambles by his feet and Ranboo holds it down for him, showing him how to latch his mouth onto the toy instead of his leg. It works.

It works.

Ranboo packs the blanket in his bag and walks slowly outside, Michael following his footsteps like a diseased, terrible shadow.

---

Days pass. Michael follows Ranboo, and on rare occasions, listens to him. Ranboo's also found Michael's presence means they pass by zombies easier. Usually he can't get within a hundred feet of one without it sniffing him out, but with Michael nearby they don't even notice until they're twenty or so feet away. He takes out a couple and more often than not, runs, snagging Michael by the backpack and just bolting. Michael never seems to mind when he kills one of the other diseased— he's taken to chewing on his rubber toy like a dog. Ranboo refuses to think of him as a pet. He's a kid.

Was a kid.

Whatever. Technicalities.

They're in another store now, although the shelves are bare for the most part. Ranboo's taken to making sure everything they pass has been properly looted— he's found good stuff sometimes when other people have thought a place completely ransacked. Supplies have slowly been dwindling as they enter the, what, sixth year since the apocalypse?

Jesus. Ranboo spent most of his formative years in life or death situations. He wonders, aimlessly, searching shelves for anything other than dust, how it's changed him. Who would he be, if not this?

He's so lost in thought about his potential, lost future he doesn't hear the shuffling. Doesn't hear the groan, doesn't hear the patter of footsteps until—

Something slams into his back, and Ranboo jumps, shrilly screaming and turning with his arm out in order to fend whatever it is off, defending Michael who had been beside him not five seconds ago, hadn't he— Michael?

Michael.

Michael is fucking attached to his leg, rubber toy left abandoned on the floor, remaining eye glinting. If Ranboo didn't know any better, he'd say the kid was pleased with how he'd scared Ranboo. He takes an enormous breath, hands shaking as he pries Michael off and sinks down to the tile.

"God, Michael, you scared me," he says, breathless. He's sitting on the floor now, long legs stretched out before them both with Michael trapped between. He's gnawing on Ranboo's arm instead of his leg now, the thick duct-tape armor there more than enough to keep his teeth away. Ranboo sighs, bringing the other arm up and around him. Curling, almost protective, if he lets himself think it. "I wish I had some way to like, keep track of you... better..." he continues, letting out a tiny nervous giggle as he scans the room around them, gaze landing on the long-abandoned hardware section of the store. It's dusty, most of the racks empty, but in the farthest corner....

....a coil of rope.

"Michael," Ranboo says, as the genius hits him. "Get off. I have an idea."

Two minutes and a series of complicated, failed knots later, Ranboo has what could pass as a functioning harness.

Now all he has to do is attach it to a zombie kid. Easy in theory— not in practice. He finds himself practically bent over backwards trying to get a grip on him. Thank whatever god above Ranboo is flexible. Michael is squirming, not unlike fish caught in a river going upstream, wriggling with all his tiny might in order to escape Ranboo's grasp as he attempts to wrap the complicated harness around the kid's torso.

"Just hold still," Ranboo insists with a huff, nearly slipping on the smooth linoleum floor as Michael bounces in his arms again. He seems to have learned that biting Ranboo does nothing— the arm guards and layers of clothing are impenetrable to Michael's dull teeth. Zombies can learn, and zombies can adapt. Michael's adaptations are just to be as annoyingly slippery as possible. Like holding a greased pig. Ranboo's grip falters once more and Michael takes off on one limping leg, arms flapping out wide as he grunts and tries to escape. The next tackle Ranboo throws his way sends them both to the floor.

At least it works. The next time Michael tries to escape, he's violently thrown backwards into the tiles.

"Look out, buddy," Ranboo says dryly, panting slightly as he grips the rope. The other end of it is looped around Michael's chest and backpack, not tight enough to hurt him (can zombies feel pain?) and not loose enough for him to escape. "It does that."

He loses count of the number of times Michael clotheslines himself. It has to be dozens—throwing himself forward to escape, only to be toppled to the floor by the force of his own weight. Ranboo tries not to laugh the first few times, but by the tenth it's getting old.

“Suck it up,” he says fondly, reeling in the rope just a bit so that Michael has less leeway. The zomkid stares at him with blank eyes, and then promptly crumples to the ground and wails. “Come on. It's not that bad.” More wailing. It's kind of horrifically adorable. “You were following *me* in the first place! This is just so I can keep track of you, look!” Ranboo carefully unravels more of the rope, watching as Michael's wails subside and he pushes himself back onto his unsteady feet. The kid couldn't have been older than four when he—well, at this point, walking is like watching a baby take its first steps. Unsteady, unsure, but Ranboo is patient as he lets Michael test out the limits of his new... Ranboo doesn't want to call it a leash, but that's what it is, isn't it?

“I just want to keep you safe,” he rationalizes out loud, picking up his own bag and slinging it over his shoulders. He secures it tightly, snapping the buckles into their rightful spots before winding the loose ends of Michael's leash around his gloved fingers. It pulls tight, just the right amount of pressure for Ranboo to not be uncomfortable with it. Michael stares up at him. “I know you can understand me, to some extent. At least, you know what the word ‘no’ means. And ‘food’ and your name. At least, I think you know those two. Not really sure, but whenever I say Michael you look at me, so I guess it's good enough. Do you think it's good enough?” Ranboo looks down, and finds Michael still staring at him, eyes unblinking. It's a bit unnerving when he does that, but Ranboo finds it less and less scary the more time they spend together.

Michael grunts.

“Good enough!” Ranboo crows. He turns, pointing one finger towards the broken, empty door frames of the store. “Onwards!”

---

They walk. The kid leash is great. Ranboo never loses track of him, and slowly a section of his backpack becomes dedicated to Michael's stuff. The rubber toy, the blanket, and some other toys Ranboo finds and washes. He spends a whole day trying to get Michael cleaned up, kind of. He doesn't want to get too close to the kid or risk a bite, so he just kind of puts on more gloves and his extra mask before combing through Michael's remaining hair with a comb he promptly discarded. He gets water from puddles and rinses off what skin isn't rotted or dried out into leathery straps, and he even carefully pulls the kid's last two teeth when he's distracted. Less of a risk, then. It's kind of fucked up, if he thinks about it too much, but Michael doesn't seem to mind after some initial wailing and complaining.

There's a personality, there.

Michael wails when he's upset. If he's really mad, he falls to the ground and refuses to get up. When he's happy he makes a growling noise, one that Ranboo comes to adore. And he

gets defensive, too— defensive of Ranboo around other sick people. He growls, but it's different, lower and throaty. Defending his prey, Ranboo thinks, and like a proud father he drags his zombie kid away from any potential fights he might be itching to get into.

Michael likes chewy toys. He likes the color blue— some days, while they're walking, Michael won't chew or amble aimlessly— he'll look up and stare at the sky. Cloudless, blue, endless. His little foggy eye will search the horizon and the air above them like it's got the answers to everything, and it breaks Ranboo's heart.

Everything Michael does breaks his heart.

Because that was a tiny person, once. A human. And now he's like he is, mindless and empty. But not empty, not really; there's no humanity left in there, but there is Michael. And Michael is all Ranboo needs.

Whenever he catches something in the woods, be it a squirrel or bird or something, he lets Michael chew on the parts he himself can't eat. The raw flesh does something to the kid— his pupil dilates, and he gets, for the lack of a better word, the zoomies.

The first time Ranboo gives him the skinned leg of a squirrel, too tendony for his own mouth, Michael runs in circles for two hours straight that night. Ranboo spends half of that time doubled over laughing.

They come into an easy way of life, for a while.

Ranboo likes the company. Michael lets him ramble, occasionally grunting back at him. It's company, however fucked up it is. He tries not to think about it. They co-exist, and it works, and Ranboo isn't lonely. He's alive, and his ankle heals, and he's so far away from Sanctuary it might not even exist. The sky is blue and Michael stares up at it with wonder in his tiny dead eye, and Ranboo, for a moment, hopes.

And then everything comes crashing down.

It was just a normal town. A normal town, with no zombies. Like the one he'd found Michael in, Ranboo has a sneaking suspicion of what they'll find in the city center. So he heads that direction, curiosity fueling him as they move through empty streets and Ranboo chitters back when Michael clacks his jaw at him.

That is his first mistake.

The city center is full, as he was expecting— of zombies that are alive.

He freezes up on the street, staring. A horde, bigger than anything he's ever seen before. Hundreds of the dead, piled up on one another, heads turned to the sky. And out of their mouths and eyes are— plants. Plants, like Michael's plant.

Michael, who is tugging on his ropes in order to try and *join* them.

Something isn't right.

Ranboo reels him back, and that is his second mistake. Because Michael isn't stupid. Michael is actually quite smart for a dead kid. It was only a matter of time until he figured out the measly knots Ranboo kept him in were kind of flimsy, and he darts and twists and clacks his jaw until he slips free and then he is *bolting*. Bolting, right towards the horde on two little decaying feet, limping. His backpack is hung off his shoulders, bright blue and facing Ranboo. "Michael," he starts. This is when he notices something he should've noticed before, too.

The whole place smells like gasoline.

The realization hits him just as someone across the street flicks a lighter, unseen.

"MICHAEL!" Ranboo's voice rises in pitch, a steep cliffside of terror and shame, and he throws one hand out. But before he can so much as blink, the street has gone up in flames.

It burns his face, and he's too late in scrambling to pull his mask up. Fire licks and gasoline explodes, catching the side of his face as he instinctively turns. It catches his arms too as he raises them in defense, but the majority of the blaze is not long-lasting and doesn't get past the very outer layer of his clothing. He staggers backwards as pain radiates outwards on the left side of his face, his cheek excruciating, the epicenter of the burning sensation. *Pain is good*, his addled mind thinks, *it means your nerve endings haven't been fried off*.

"Holy shit!" It takes him a second to recognize the sound of a second human voice. He's on the ground— when did that happen?— hands curled up against his face as he tries not to vomit from the pain. And from the thought of Michael. The kid— his kid, he'd been running straight into the horde just as Ranboo was last looking, and now that same horde is dying.

Really, truly dying. Screeches of the twice-dead pitch high and long above the sound of the flames, writhing shapes occasionally escaping them, still on fire. All of them fall at some point, some more abruptly than others. The scene is apocalyptic. Distantly, he recognizes the fact that those escaping zombies are being shot, crumpling to the ground with bolts sticking out of their heads. More voices.

"—are they okay?? Holy shit—"

"I didn't even see them come out of the— what the hell were you doing, kid? Jesus fucking christ." There are hands on his arms and shoulders, keeping him down as he struggles to get up, struggles to push past them and reach out towards the flames.

"Michael," he rasps, ignoring the scorching burn on his cheek in favor of trying to call out. "Michael, he's—"

"Oh god," someone says, up and to his left. "Oh my god, Dream—"

"Shut up," the other voice says, a little more muffled. "George, keep shooting. There's nothing we can do."

"If there was someone in there—" Ranboo chokes out a sob before they can finish. The tears sting his injury as they track down his face and he wants to verbalize, wants to tell them, but

it's too late. Michael is long gone. And it hurts, it hurts so bad.

"Michael," he croaks again, and the arguing above him shuts up. In the distance, he hears most of the unholy screaming has stopped.

"Get the medkit," one of them says. "Pull him back from the fire."

Hands hook under his arms and he lets them, the pavement rough against his jeans as they drag him backwards and away from the worst of the heat. The air gets cooler, blissful against his angry skin, and he doesn't fight them. He doesn't fight them as they pull him to his feet, slinging an arm over their shoulder and carefully, on wobbly legs, he tries to walk. He's not really hurt anywhere other than his face, but the shock is still coursing through him, mixing with adrenaline in a shitty cocktail of brain juice. He's still crying, too.

"Calm down," someone says, rough against his ear. Their breath is coming hard, like they just ran a mile. "It's okay. We're gonna help you."

Ranboo can't bring himself to answer. He just staggers onwards, until there's a chair beneath him and cool hands on his face. Water, dripping into his mouth. He eagerly takes it, even if it stings on the way down. And then, he floats for a while. It's odd. He disconnects from his body, disconnects from the blurry shapes in front of him and their voices, and just stares at a wall. He's pretty sure they're not from Sanctuary— he's probably safe. But Michael isn't.

"—couldn't have known," someone is saying when he tunes back in. Three voices now, instead of two. Gentle hands cradle his face, pressing a pad of gauzy white against his cheek. It's cool. Some sort of cream must be on it, because the previously tight skin of his burn is looser now, hurts less. "They weren't showing themselves, after all."

"We *killed* someone," another voice says, and the person in front of him exhales, their breath gentle and warm over Ranboo's face. "And hurt this kid. Look at him. He's probably, what, sixteen?"

"Seventeen," he murmurs instinctively. Someone inhales.

"Well, at least he's lucid," one of them says. Ranboo cracks his eye open— the other is stuck, refuses to, but at least one works. The scene in front of him is fuzzy and he's still crying, which isn't helping at all. There's a face in front of him, a strong jawline and scruff against his chin, dark black hair and blue eyes. His mask is pulled down, and he's holding the gauze to Ranboo's face.

"Hi," he says, staring openly at him. "Are you awake?"

"I have been," Ranboo says, wincing and then wincing more as every movement pulls and twinges his burnt skin. "Ow," he says faintly.

"Don't move it too much," one of the other figures says, and Ranboo glances over. They've got dusty blond hair, cropped short in the back and left longer in the front. They've still got their mask on, bright green and a faux smile painted across the front. His arms are crossed. All of them carry weapons— Ranboo spots a crossbow on the man's hip in front of him. That

explains who'd been shooting the escaping zombies, then. "You'll hurt yourself more. What the fuck were you doing there, kid?"

"Michael wanted to—" Ranboo swallows, watching as Blue Eyes avoids his gaze and Green Smile only stares harder. "Michael was pulling me there."

"Was Michael in the horde?" Green Smile asks.

"No shit," someone murmurs, and Ranboo glances over. The third of the group is shorter than Green Smile, leaning against the doorway of whatever dilapidated house they're in. He's got a palette of black and white and red, his mask up and firm against his face. A white headband holds his hair back from his face, long and black. "You heard him scream."

"Michael is—" Ranboo stops, heaving a breath. Because Michael is gone, and he is not coming back, and he is burnt up and his little body is probably still out there, turning to ash in the street with the other dead. His backpack, gone. His little face— his hair, his curls, the way his eye glimmered when it was sunny.

Ranboo is crying again, he thinks. It's hard to tell with how blurry his vision had been already. He probably hit his head on the way down.

"Fuck," someone says. He chokes his sobs back. It's the least he can do to reassure these people the fire didn't kill someone already alive.

"He was dead," he slurs, his voice coming out weird as his left cheek refuses to move. "Already."

"...what?"

"Dead already," Ranboo assures them all, even though it brings him no comfort. Because Michael had been alive, in some sick way. And he'd been Ranboo's only comfort for weeks on end. Like a fucked-up pet, attached by rope and desperation. "Sick."

"Oh." Silence falls over the room, and he's sure there are glances he can't decipher nor see being passed around between the group. Based on the comfortable air between them, the way conversation flows naturally, he's guessing they're a group. No one speaks for a while, and in front of him, Blue Eyes carefully tapes the gauze to his cheek. The cream does little to stave off the thrumming of his own heartbeat in his own skin.

Ranboo is really, really tired. His head hurts. He can hear his own heart, the way it pumps his blood, and it's rushing in his ears. It pounds in his chest, and he thinks if he were outside his body he might be able to see it visibly straining against his chest or clothes. Everyone in the room must be able to hear it, he thinks, his vision tunneling as he stares at the wall. He should warn someone about that, maybe. He opens his mouth to try.

---



When he wakes up, it's dark outside. He's not alone— somewhere in the distance he can hear the sound of a fire burning, the crunch of charcoal logs falling on each other, and the low murmur of conversation. His cheek hurts. He's lying on his good side, a blanket draped over his shoulders and torso, head tipped to the right and arms tucked up underneath him. Recovery position. Damn, they know what they're doing.

He can hear them. The ones who had found him earlier. It comes back to him in a rush of pain.

Michael's gone. He's alone again.

For the most part.

He pushes away the crippling depression trying to overtake him and heaves a breath, focusing on staying still and listening. There are people nearby— at least three of them— who can maybe answer some of his questions. And they're not from Sanctuary. Based on what he saw earlier, he knows none of these people.

“—skid runner,” someone's saying. He can't remember who's voice is whose. “I asked them about more gasoline. They say supply is the lowest it's been in months.”

“So we keep on with the natural gas lines,” someone else says. “The town halls have been working out, generally.”

“Next thing you know we'll be breaking into London's vaults,” a third voice says, and this one is accented. “Just to see if any lines go under the city.”

“It's not a bad idea,” the second voice says.

“Oh, come on,” says the first. “Look at what happened today. That second street wasn't supposed to explode. And someone got hurt because of it.” Silence, and Ranboo holds his breath. Thankfully, the conversation continues. “If we want to blow the fuckin' city up, we're going to need to patrol it and clear it out beforehand. And we can't do it just the three of us.”

The third voice interrupts: “We killed someone today.”

“George.” It's the second one again, sounding mildly exasperated. “The kid said whoever Michael was, he was sick.”

“Doesn't mean he wasn't someone.”

Silence again.

“I'm going to go check on him,” the first voice says, and there's rustling as clothing shifts and someone steps aside. The voice gets closer, while the others stay distant. “I think his head injury was worse than we thought. Be right back.” Ruffling, and then footsteps. Ranboo squeezes his eyes shut as they approach, echoing in his head.

“Hey,” someone says a second later, and a warm hand is on his shoulder. The voice is soft. “Hey, kid. You up?”

Ranboo debates not opening his eyes. These people probably won't hurt him— they were so concerned about him that they wasted medical supplies on his burn, so they can't be that bad, right?

He cracks open an eye and meets green. The man with the smile mask is above him, eyes furrowed in worry.

“Are you feeling alright?” He asks, and Ranboo slowly shifts to sitting up, nodding a bit.

There's a gaping hole in his heart, but he's okay other than that.

“Yeah,” he rasps. “I'm fine.”

“I'm sorry,” the man says before he can get another word out, any questions. “I'm sorry about Michael. We didn't know.”

“It's not your fault,” Ranboo croaks, because he can't find the strength in himself to blame them. They hadn't known— it was his fault, really, trying to get too close to a horde to see what was going on. He never should have investigated. He should've just left. High tailed it out of there and fucking ran. “He— he was dead already.”

“I'm still sorry,” the man says, and then he holds out a hand. It's callused, covered in soot. “I'm Dream.”

“Ranboo.” They shake, and his hands are rough, but Ranboo still isn't scared. He's bold enough to ask: “Are you from Sanctuary?”

He knows the man isn't. The compound had been small and tight knit, but Ranboo knew they would hire an outsider to find him if they could.

“Who?” Dream asks, tipping his head. “No, I'm not.”

“Okay.” Ranboo's entire body sags with relief. “Okay, okay, awesome. Awesome. I'm sorry, I'm—”

“You don't have to apologize,” Dream says. “My friends and I— we're the sorry ones. They're George and Sapnap. We, uh. We're trying to kill as many zombies as possible, and we're so sorry Michael got caught up in the crossfire.”

“He was a zombie,” Ranboo reiterates. “Just... a little one. I. I can't—” Tears, thick and ugly and heavy, drip down his face before he can stop them, and he can see how Dream watches him with a concerned look.

“Do you want a hug?” He asks after a minute, and Ranboo nods, and then he's being hugged. By someone alive, with blood running through their veins and a beating heart and it's been so fucking long since someone has touched him like that—

He breaks off into incoherent sobs and wails, too tired to be embarrassed about it.

Later on, when they've got Ranboo up and by their campfire, a warm metal can in between his fingers, Dream will lean up against his shoulder and tell him about a compound. He shows him a faded little scrap of fabric, a flag with blue and red and yellow and black, and explains what L'Manberg is to him. Ranboo is scared. Scared that they'll be like Sanctuary (all strict rules and harsh punishments) but Dream assures him they're not. They're fighting to make the world a better place, he says. One where people can *live* , not just survive.

Ranboo is hesitant. He says he'll think about it. That afternoon, Sapnap disappears for a few hours and comes back covered in ash, holding the scraps of what could've once been a bright blue school bag. The embroidery has been burnt away, but Ranboo takes the bag anyway and hugs it close to his chest.

They help him dig a hole for it just outside town, layering dirt on top of the scraps and then with shaking fingers, Ranboo etches *Michael* into a piece of wood. It sticks out of the ground there, a tiny marker for a tiny creature. He digs in his bag and gently places the few toys he'd found for Michael there, but he keeps the first rubber one. Michael's favorite. He keeps the blanket, too, as ripped and stained and smelly as it is, and the scrap of a blue backpack.

They don't laugh at him. They're kind, and quiet, and respectful. They leave him to sit at the graveside and cry for a little bit without a word, and when Ranboo comes stumbling back to the campfire that night with a little more resolve in his step, asking for direction to L'Manberg, they give it to him.

Hope. Sparkling, crumbling anew.

## End Notes

im really sorry :(

but! but! its okay<3 ranboo finds happiness again :)

and friends, etc etc. thank you for reading

-

find me on [twitter](#) and [tumblr](#)!

i also now have a [discord](#) if you're interested!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!